

Using Wikis for Collaborative Writing in the ELT Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of an educational wiki to develop the second language (L2) writing skills of English language students who are placed on a two-week online course to develop skills in English for work-related purposes. It discusses the use of wikis for learning L2, focusing on learning writing through collaborative tasks. The discussion analyses views and theories on the use of wikis for developing writing skills and the issues associated with the use of wikis for collaborative tasks. The research engages L2 students and a teacher in a task using Wikispaces, an educational type of wikis. The data is collected via a questionnaire, interviews and the teacher's diary. The study suggests wikis might usefully assist students with their L2 writing and that students are likely to value the opportunity to work collaboratively on a writing task or certain type of task. However, not all students would be expected to feel comfortable with the wiki technology and its features. As wikis are still increasingly popular in language classrooms, a more in-depth study that would take a closer look at the usefulness of wikis for such classroom tasks might bring new insights and interesting results to the discussion on wikis in the English language classroom (ELT). It is suggested, therefore, that future research with a larger and more diverse audience and with a more specific focus might provide better information in this regard.

Keywords: collaborative writing; wikis; ELT; online language learning; Wikispaces

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INTRODUCTION

Wikis have been increasingly popular web 2.0 technology used in classrooms (Kurt, 2017), in education. In the context of education, they offer students a collaborative environment (Augar, et al., 2004), enabling them to interact and socialise while completing various tasks (Beldarrain, 2006) via distance learning (Godwin-Jones, 2003; William & Jacobs, 2004) utilising both ‘real-time and /or time-delayed collaboration’ (Beldarrain, 2006). A “wiki” is described by its creators, Leuf and Cunningham (2001: 14), as:

...a freely expandable collection of interlinked web pages, a hypertext system for storing and modifying information – a database, where each page is easily edited by any user with a forms-capable Web browser client.

Educational wikis, such as Wikispaces (Wikispaces, 2013), offer an opportunity for both blended and distance learning (Schwartz et al., 2004). This study investigates the benefits of wikis to assist advanced English language students’ collaborative writing.

To conduct the study, Wikispaces, a so-called wiki ‘clone’, which imitates the original wiki (Ebersbach et al., 2006), was used to provide advanced students of English with a collaborative environment, to enable them to complete a written task, involving production of a written text, and a job enquiry letter using wiki technology. The wiki was chosen for this task for its simplicity and the fact that its users are unfamiliar with complex editing styles such as HTML (Goodwin-Jones, 2003, Beldarrain, 2006). Therefore, the style offered by wiki, known as WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get), that involves easy to use toolbars and simple editing method, do not require advanced technical knowledge (Ebersbach et al., 2006; Leuf & Cunningham, 2001). Further benefits of Wikispaces include its simple design and supportive features, such as discussion forums and pages that can incorporate links to other wiki pages for use when learning to write collaboratively. The wiki is managed by Tangient LLC, a group of people in the United States, who claim to have been dedicated to creating ‘the world’s easiest to use a wiki (Wikispaces, 2013). They envisage the wiki as ‘space on the Web’ where people can share anything including their ‘work and ideas, pictures and links, videos and media’. ‘Wikispaces is special,’ they claim, because it provides users with a variety of online tools to easily share all types of content through safe online interaction, because teachers/instructors can set them up and control who joins them (Wikispaces, 2013).

This paper investigates the potential usefulness of the wiki in the ELT context. It also provides a tentative investigation mechanism to establish both students’ and teachers’ perceptions concerning the affordances of Web 2.0 technology. The researcher took on the role of the teacher in this study. Throughout it, the researcher considered whether the wiki was assisting the development of the students writing skills through collaborative work and if it made their writing more enjoyable and meaningful. Furthermore, the researcher assessed the possible challenges the students might encounter and determined how these might be overcome to improve the value of Web 2.0 technology to the English classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How can wikis assist learners in writing in a second language?

According to the literature, this technology gives users autonomy and a range of interactive online tools with which to communicate, share and contribute to the content of a project. Waycott and Kennedy (2009) and McLoughlin and Lee (2008), as summarised by Shih (2011), claimed the use of Web 2.0 technologies in the language classroom might positively support the processes of learning and learning outcomes.

Wikis are an effective platform for collaborative group work and projects, as students can identify problems, post comments and discuss topics in discussion forums (Godwin-Jones, 2003). According to Godwin-Jones (2003), discussion forums are the main tool used by teachers to promote ‘written exchanges’ among students, and L2 teachers find them beneficial, as when participating in discussions, students write more and can communicate in authentic contexts.

One of the benefits of the wiki is that its digital features are easy to use, in particular, its syntax (Ebersbach et al., 2006), also known as ‘wiki syntax’ or ‘wikitext’, which is a special language that wikis use for formatting pages (Ayers et al., 2008). However, wikis syntax rules may vary depending on the type of wiki used (Augar et al., 2004). However, some wikis, including Wikispaces and Wikipedia, do not require users to be familiar with wiki syntax, as there is a simple editing tab (Leuf and Cunningham, 2001) ensuring “text can be edited directly in its correct formatted form” (Ebersbach et al., 2006: 376), in other words, what you type is what you see. There are many useful functions included in the editing tab (Figure 1) to process text, insert visuals, embed widgets and add comments (Ebersbach et al., 2006). In practice users do not need to spend time acquiring technical skills in editing, writing and processing a wiki web page; instead, they can focus on the actual content of their writing instead. Thus, in general, teachers do not need to provide additional support to less confident learners to assist them in using wikis for their writing

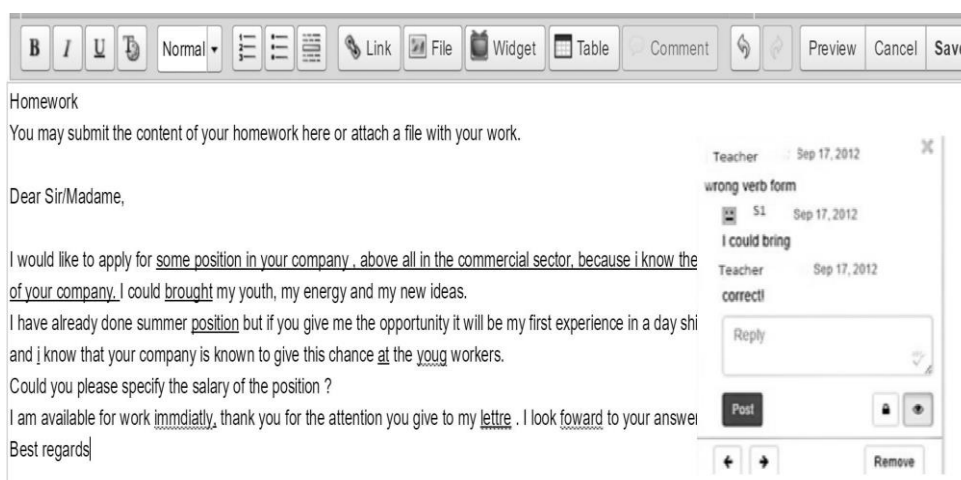


Fig.1 An edited page on the wiki with a comment box added.

Research shows that using wiki as online learning tools has benefits such as supporting interactions, collaborative learning and other social activities (William and Jacobs, 2004; Augar et al., 2004), as well as meeting the needs and requirements of distance learning (Schwartz et al., 2004). By using Wikispaces, learners can work both individually and collaboratively with or without their teacher. Elola and Oskoz (2010: 53) claim “They can create, transform, and erase their work with built-in accountability.” As Elola and Oskoz (Elola and Oskoz, 2010) continue, learners do not just collaborate; they also engage in content development. There are many advantages to working with a teacher when using the wiki for learning, such as receiving feedback and online support from the teacher, having tasks and activities appropriately structured and set up for online use, as well as being encouraged to work with others collaboratively. Also, the teacher can give feedback on both individual students’ performance and each group’s work by posting comments in the comment box, in the private message tool or on the forum.

As Salmon (2011) suggests, by providing ‘online feedback’ to students, teachers can make learning methods valuable. Salmon (2011: 220) believes “feedback is critical to retention and achievement”. One of the benefits of having the teacher on board is the fact that it means having someone to be able to promote group collaboration effectively by setting up suitable activities, coordinating students’ work and engaging the students themselves in the learning process (Choy and Ng, 2007).

Issues affecting the effective use of wikis in educational contexts

Despite having the potential to be a successful technology that can support online language learning, in particular, collaborative learning and social interaction, the literature regarding the use of wikis in education remains very limited (Choy and Ng, 2007). The research shows the use of wikis in educational contexts has not been as effective as initially anticipated, and that many educators encountered issues when using wikis in the classroom (Davies, 2004; Beldarrain, 2006). Choy and Ng (2007) point out that the disadvantage of using a wiki in education is that it allows people to add content to sites making it less controllable and less personal. Salmon (2011) also claims that because contributions can be easily edited by others, users of wikis have less control of their content.

In contrast, Leuf and Cunningham (2001: 336) establish that ‘open authoring works’ are beneficial. They believe that “the more open you can run a wiki, the more valuable content and structure you will probably see in it” (Leuf and Cunningham; 2001:336). Another issue involves sharing work with others, which seems to be difficult for wiki users when seeking to understand that the concept of sharing one’s work with the broader community is central to wikis (Davies, 2004).

A further difficulty for wiki participants can be changing to a new mode of communication when they are familiar with email. Wiki communication tools include private messaging, in-text comments (figure 1), discussion forums and entries made by editing the page, due to the habit of overusing emails as a

convenient way of communicating, even when there are better, more beneficial means of communication available (Davies, 2004).

Choy and Ng (2007) also mention ‘pedagogical considerations’ when using wikis, as they see ‘wiki’ pedagogy as a ‘significant factor’ affecting the ‘quality of wiki applications’. The use of a wiki in an educational context requires a collaborative learning approach (Choy and Ng, 2007), which may be a challenge for many educators, as their effectiveness in working collaboratively with students determine the effectiveness with which they use wikis in collaborative online learning (Choy and Ng, 2007).

Therefore, the role of the teacher is crucial to ensuring effectiveness when using wikis in educational contexts. According to Salmon (2011), ‘networked computers’ can offer both real learning resources and social interaction, but students still require e-moderators who can make this happen. Aydin and Yildiz (2014: 173) believe that “task-based instruction is essential in fostering interaction and collaboration among learners and the type of task affects the way learners interact with each other”, which suggests that not only the teachers, moderators play the important role in making the online interaction successful, but also the type of task that is given to the learners may affect their collaboration.

In summary, despite some drawbacks, such as lack of control when multiple users are working together, sharing and adding to content (Davies, 2004; Beldarrain, 2006); Choy and Ng, 2007; Salmon, 2011) many studies have shown that Web 2.0 technology, which includes wikis, have been increasingly used in educational contexts (Kurt, 2017) and have proven to be particularly successful when engaging students in collaborative learning and social interaction through both distance and blended learning and teaching.

RESEARCH METHODS

The Participants

The participants comprised thirteen international students studying English as a second or foreign language, twelve of whom were studying English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) at a college in Scotland and one of whom was a postgraduate at a Scottish University. The participants’ ages ranged from seventeen to fifty-four. The participants had diverse nationalities and diverse educational backgrounds. The English language levels of the participants ranged from lower intermediate (Scottish Intermediate, 1, CEFR: B1) to lower advanced (Scottish Higher, CEFR: C1).

The selection criteria for participation was governed by language level, which had to be intermediate at least. All participants were informed about the study and participation was voluntary. The college students were the researcher’s students, and the University student responded to an invitation from the researcher sent out to recruit additional participants. Before the study, the researcher became familiar with the technology and met with the students at the college for a 30-minute induction session. Those who were not able to attend the session were sent details via email. The e-mail contained all the necessary instructions about how to use the

Wikispaces website, the aim of the course and how to communicate with the teacher during the study.

Data collection and data analysis

The data were collected using questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and a teacher's diary.

The online questionnaire was designed to investigate students' perceptions about using wikis for writing, and details of the participants' backgrounds were collected quantitatively. The participants were required to respond on a five-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree and not applicable. Space for additional comments was included at the end of the questionnaire, to enable them to express additional views. Thirteen participants completed the questionnaire via a web link between May and October 2012. The results were generated as descriptive statistics and graphed information, and then downloaded into a Word document for analysis.

To obtain additional qualitative information and the participants' insights, the researcher conducted interviews with six participants in total between May and September 2012 and analysed the data. The researcher then recorded and transcribed the sessions and then interpreted them.

A teacher's diary was used to gather the qualitative data to develop an understanding of the participants' behaviour and describe potential learning and communication patterns. The teacher-researcher then read and analysed the notes obtained to ascertain how the participants behaved during the task.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Do students find wikis helpful regarding assisting them with their writing?

The students were asked to complete an online questionnaire to discover how they felt about using Wikispaces for writing. In particular, they were asked how they felt about using the technology to assist their writing, and about the online activities offered, specifically if they enjoyed doing them. The responses to the questionnaires (Figure 2) showed 61 per cent agreed that they found the wikis assisted their writing, while only 15 per cent disagreed.

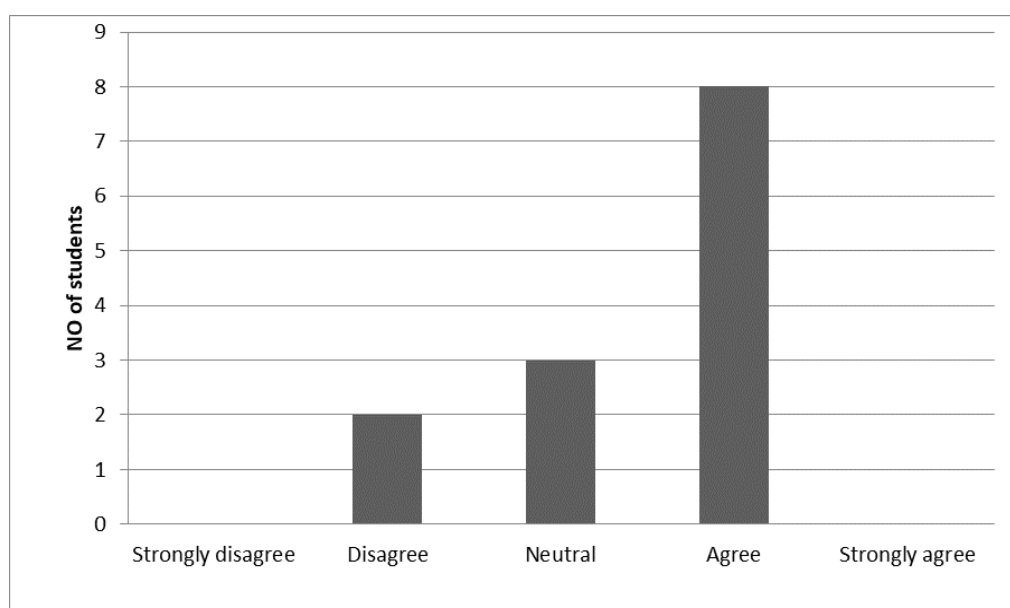


Fig.2 Levels of agreement among students (n=12) about finding Wikispaces helpful in term of assisting them in their writing

The agree/strongly agree responses (Table 1) show more than half the students (53 per cent) enjoyed online activities expressing an interest in using this type of technology in the future. Almost 70 per cent claimed using "Wikispaces" had improved their writing in English and that the activities assisted the development of their L2. Although the vast majority of students (92 per cent) found the online materials easy to use, a majority (77 per cent) still required the teacher's assistance to complete tasks.

Positive response questions	Agree/Strongly Agree on %	Likert, 1-5 Mean (SD)
The purpose of using "Wikispaces" was clear	69	3.7 (0.7)
The online learning materials were easy to use		4.1 (0.5)
I needed my teacher's help to do the tasks	77	2.9 (0.8)
The online activities were enjoyable	53	3.4 (0.7)
The activities were useful in developing my English	69	3.8 (0.6)
Using "Wikispaces" has improved my writing in English	69	3.7 (0.6)

I would like to use "Wikispaces" in my English course	53	3.5 (0.8)
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Table 1. Levels of agreement among students (n=12) about finding Wikispaces helpful in term of assisting them in their writing.

To obtain more in-depth information about students' perceptions when using the wiki for writing, their experiences of working online with others, completing online tasks and using Web 2.0 technology for learning English, semi-structured interviews were held at the Further Education (FE) college.

In general, all the respondents reported finding Wikispaces useful regarding assisting their writing, in particular, writing for specific purposes and learning specialist vocabulary:

Yes, I think it is useful because we can improve our writing. (S3)

Wiki has taught me some vocabulary; it is just the kind of writing for when applying for a job because it was one topic on the Wiki. (S4)

...I know lots of people have problems with writing, especially writing letters, about how to do this properly. (S2)

All the students valued the opportunities that Wikispaces provided them to work together when learning English. Some students highlighted the benefits of sharing and exchanging their experiences and ideas with others and commented on the opportunity to express their own opinions and ask questions. They believed they could learn from each other, e.g. learn correct grammatical structures and how to write certain types of text properly, or learning from more advanced students. Some pointed out that entering into a discussion with others can be very productive, as when they read comments from their peers they can get a clearer idea of what to write:

I found it very useful; the part of Wiki where you can share experiences with the other students. (S1)

Just I think communicating with different students is important. We can get to know each other, and we can always talk to each other and ask questions, I do like discussions with other students. (S2)

Wikispaces is good for speaking with other students about your experience or expressing your point of view. (S5)

...when English is not your natural language it is important to share your point of view... (S5)

...because we can discuss with other people about different subjects, but I think I learn more English when I speak English and its different to writing English...because it is active, it is very active. When the people who are in the discussion have a different opinion. (S6)

The grammar, the other person's writing was very good and I could learn from them. (S3)

One student found it useful to communicate with their teacher online, noting that rapid feedback helped them with their writing:

I also like that I can write to my teacher and she can answer me back and correct my mistakes or give me some advice. (S2).

One student saw even more benefits to using Wikispaces for writing, such as the opportunity to correct texts by editing and saving within a page:

You can go to it, and in the same place you can do everything, you can correct it. (S1)

One student felt that the website design, in particular, the tab style format for editing was outdated, and they did not find it useful:

The website itself is not modern, I do not think, but that is a great concept... I think it is useful...The tabs you know, the tabs are not very useful. (S4)

To conclude, the responses from the interviews showed that all the learners found wikis helpful regarding assisting them with their writing. The main benefit from using wikis for the writing cited was collaborative work. This involved sharing knowledge and experiences with others. Furthermore, the results showed the role of the teacher was significant, as 77 per cent of respondents required the teacher's help to complete tasks. In addition, one learner found the wiki useful in learning work-related vocabulary that the student believes may be helpful in applying for a job, while another found the tool helpful in learning to write certain types of letters, which may suggest that it might be the task that influenced (Aydin and Yildiz, 2014), perhaps even motivated the student to participate in the online interaction to write certain type of text. These findings are consistent with the view that teacher's role in online learning is significant if the teacher is engaged in the process (Choy and Ng, 2007) and the type of task may influence learners' collaboration (Aydin and Yildiz, 2014).

The interview results showed many benefits to using Wikispaces; i.e. having a single 'database' where any user can edit a page with ease (Leuf and Cunningham, 2001) without holding special editing knowledge, such as knowledge of HTML (Goodwin-Jones, 2003, Beldarrain, 2006) as the "syntax in all wikis is the same" (Ebersbach et al., 2006: 135). There are simple formatting rules establishing how wiki text is edited. Therefore both advanced and basic users should feel comfortable editing it.

What are the challenges that students encounter when using wikis and how do they overcome or deal with them?

Five out of the six students discussed problems that arose during the online course. Three students shared their experiences with technical problems, such as

editing, underlining the text and saving, as well as lack of experience using the wiki, and not being updated about this type of technology.

One student found it difficult to use tools to correct the existing text as the wiki differed from other word processors that were more familiar to students:

For instance, if I needed to correct something and I did not know how to underline that I know how to do it when I use it in word or some of the others [processors]. However, in Wiki spaces, I found it a little that was the only thing.... (S1)

To deal with the editing problem, the students tried to underline the text using the wiki editing tab; unfortunately, they could not then complete the editing function. The student did not ask the teacher for assistance:

I tried to go to that place where it said underline this and I could not. I did not find a way to do it correctly [editing], maybe I should have asked [the teacher], but I did not. (S1)

Although useful for this one student, the wiki was found challenging by others during the course:

I found it [wikispaces] useful but as I am not very used to use this technology. I'm computer literate and everything but I'm not super updated on that. (S1)

According to the teacher's observations, the students used various methods for sending their homework. Although they were encouraged to use wiki pages and submit their work by editing, they were also advised to send homework if preferred by e-mail or wiki private message. At the end of week 1, the teacher made the following observations:

Some chose to submit their work via discussions which were fine as I could give them my feedback so others could see, some submitted on a homework page which was even better as they could edit their text as many times as they needed and also respond to my comments straight after they have finished. Only a couple of students decided to send their work by e-mail. (T)

At the end of the second week, the course teacher gathered the students' homework together. It had been received via different communication tools. According to the teacher's records, two students submitted their homework via the general discussion page, two students sent it by email and one student submitted a statement via the Wikispaces' private message.

The way students submitted their homework suggests the wiki style of contributing to content by editing the page was still unfamiliar, although some managed to utilise the discussion board to submit their work, this still

encompassed the wiki principle of sharing ideas with others (Beldarrain, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Warschauer, 2001).

Four students used emails as a mean of communicating, as they found email a more private way to share work with their teacher, suggesting they did not adapt to the concept of wiki sharing (Davies, 2004), had an email habit (Davies, 2004), or were unfamiliar in general with an open and sharing environment (Salmon, 2011).

The students' responses to the interview question relating to the challenges they encountered during the course suggested none were concerned about issues relating to privacy, security or ownership of the contributions made on wiki (Choy and Ng, 2007; Salmon, 2011; Ebersbach et al., 2006). Although the students did not feel exposed to the outside world, as Wikispaces is a closed type wiki, the way the wiki works was unfamiliar (Salmon, 2011; Davies, 2004), which may explain why several students found editing a problem, despite the fact that Wikispaces uses a simple WYSIWYG approach (Leuf & Cunningham, 2001; Ebersbach et al., 2006).

CONCLUSION

Conclusion, limitations and further directions

The results suggest that the majority of students found wikis helpful when developing their writing in L2, that the online activities helped to improve their English language skills, and that they valued the opportunity of working together during tasks; thus, supporting the idea that working together is still popular among students (Aydin and Yildiz, 2014; Warschauer, 2001). However, they encountered some challenges, possibly indicating that not all students can readily adapt to this type of technology (Beldarrain, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2003), or that the highly collaborative style demanded may be unfamiliar (Davies, 2004; Salmon, 2011).

The findings also suggest the students experienced some technical problems when using the wiki, e.g. when editing or submitting their work. As a result they used alternative methods to communicate, e.g. email or discussion boards, which while still embracing the wiki principle of sharing ideas with others (Beldarrain, 2006; Godwin-Jones, 2003; Warschauer, 2001), may indicate that the more traditional email remains the preferred method of exchange between students and teachers (Godwin-Jones, 2003; Davies, 2004). Another possibility might be that for some technology that seeks to share ideas openly and in public may be perceived as hostile (Davies, 2004; Salmon, 2011).

The results show that students occasionally required the teacher's assistance and that teacher participation is perceived positively in general (Choy and Ng, 2007); providing an opportunity for students to receive online feedback can make learning methods more successful (Salmon, 2011). This might also suggest that technology cannot replace the need for face-to-face teaching, and that students would benefit more from a blended learning approach (Moss and Southwood, 2006), since they often require the teacher's help to complete tasks and that the

type of tasks learners are given may affect their interaction (Aydin and Yildiz, 2014) and whether they perceive wikis useful for learning writing in English.

The major limitation of this study was the relatively small number of participants (n=12). Future studies should aim to evaluate a larger and more diverse group of students and instructors and use carefully developed online resources to obtain valuable data and more meaningful results on the usefulness of wikis in writing in ELT. Also, careful analysis of students' writing, e.g. its syntactic or lexical features, and students' behaviours during collaborative tasks could reveal whether L2 students produce better results when using Web 2.0 resources.

Research shows that using a 'wiki' to learn a second language has measurable benefits; including supporting interactions, collaborative learning, and other social activities (Williams and Jacobs, 2004; Augar et al., 2004) and providing students with distance learning opportunities (Schwartz et al., 2004). However, as the study was conducted several years ago and the literature on using wikis in educational contexts remains very limited; therefore, additional, more up-to-date studies on their usefulness in the context of ELT and the potential problems that both learners and teachers face, are required.

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